[FINANCE]



**Engineer with a solar mission**

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An American nuclear engineer/entrepreneur talks to K I Woo about his US$29-million Eastern Seaboard solar-energy project

An American nuclear engineer with a successful track record in Thailand is now embarking on a new Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate project that he hopes will make the country a significant global alternative-energy player.

Douglas Parsons, president and CEO of Thai Photovoltaics (TPV), said that when his US$29-million (Bt1.27 billion) project is completed, the country will account for about 4 per cent of the world's total solar-cell production.

"TPV will be exporting about 90 per cent of its production," he said.

The company will be using the latest amorphous silicon technology and locally produced clear float glass to manufacture photovoltaic (PV) modules, which generate electricity from sunlight. "Our photovoltaic modules will sell at an initial price of $2.50/watt," he said.

Parsons added that manufacturers of similar modules currently in the market, use costlier production techniques. "The average world wholesale price of PV modules is currently around $3.60/watt and associated production costs are about $2.50/watt."

With this cost advantage, he expects that TPV - which will manufacture PV modules producing 20 Megawatts of electricity per year - will be selling to the region's electricity-hungry consumers.

The company's low-cost PV solar-cell modules will be manufactured on proven US and European manufacturing equipment and techniques. TPV will be purchasing its production equipment from Energy Photovoltaics Inc (EPV), which Parsons said is the world's top manufacturer of turnkey amorphous-silicon PV-module production equipment.

"EPV is among the world's most experienced manufacturers of thin-film amorphous silicon solar modules," said Parsons.

Following two earlier successful high-tech projects in the King-dom, he has high hopes for the project.

His initial company, he said, was responsible for bringing in the first high-energy linear electron-beam accelerator to Thailand. Parsons was also president of Sterigenics Thailand.

Sterigenics installed the country's largest Cobalt-60 irradiator for sterilising medical products and foodstuffs. "The company was bought out by a Belgian public company several years ago," he said.

After Sterigenics was sold, Parsons said he wanted to start another high-tech project here. He looked around globally for more than a year to find something which would match the country's needs and resources. "It had to be a project which would also make money for our investors as well."

A nuclear engineer by training, Parsons said that during his year of due diligence, he gradually became aware of the importance of alternative-energy production. "Energy production represents about 30 per cent of the world's gross output and is a major determinant of our standard of living."

At the same time, he realised that the world's energy industry faced serious problems. "The use of fossil fuels is detrimental to the environment and their supply is limited," he said.


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